

2009 MAY BE GOOD YEAR FOR WIND POWER

By Karl Puckett

Enough wind energy to power up to 37,800 homes hit the electrical grid in Montana this year, and production could be double that over the next year if planned expansions and new projects in the pipeline come to fruition in 2009.

The country's credit crunch could slow the planning of brand new wind farms in the new year but it isn't leading to cancellations of facilities that are further along in the planning process, developers and state regulators said.

"Traditionally, wind energy development has been pretty financially secure," said Chantel McCormick, a senior energy development specialist with the state Department of Commerce's Energy Promotion and Development Division. "So I think we're going to be OK.

"We're just hoping to build what we've already started," she said.

Wind generation still accounts for just a fraction of the state's electricity output, with coal-fired production, mainly the 2,100-megawatt Colstrip power plants, making up 64 percent of production.

Montana ranks 15th in the nation in wind production, despite its No. 5 ranking in potential. Wind generation accounts for 1.5 percent of the nation's total electricity supply,

But 2008 saw 126 megawatts of new wind generation in Big Sky country, bumping its total to 271.5 megawatts.

A single megawatt is enough to power between 250 to 300 homes, according to the American Wind Energy Association. The new wind generation would be sufficient to power all the homes in Great Falls.

In October, NaturEner USA-owned Glacier Wind Farm completed the 106.5-megawatt first phase of the 210-megawatt Glacier Wind Farm in Glacier and Toole counties north of Great Falls, and it began selling the power to a California utility.